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An Ottoman View of Missionary Activity in Hawai‘i

AS THE NINETEENTH CENTURY drew to a close, the Ottoman Empire, the only non-Christian great power of Europe, was involved in a losing competition with the Christian great powers. As its territory spanning Europe and Asia steadily dwindled, and European powers such as Great Britain, Russia, and France claimed the right to protect various Christian minorities, one of the most grievous threats to the integrity of the empire seemed to come from missionary activity. Missionaries had long been active in the Ottoman Empire, but in the last quarter of the nineteenth century missionary work acquired an unprecedented momentum as part of the “White Man’s Burden” to civilize the world.¹

From around the middle of the century a new factor was added to the complications surrounding the Ottoman state’s fight for survival: American Protestant missionary activity.² Although a small group of men at first, by the turn of the century they had acquired considerable presence in Ottoman domains, particularly through their educational activities. With the accession to the throne of Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909) the Islamic aspect of the state ideology acquired renewed emphasis. Rapidly missionaries became something of a *bête noir* for the sultan, who saw them as an extremely dangerous fifth column steadily increasing their influence in his already threatened domains.³

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The document translated below is located in the Prime Ministry Archives in Istanbul. It was written by the Ottoman consul general in New York, Münci Bey, who served in that position from 1894 to 1897. The fact that an Ottoman diplomat in New York should have taken the trouble to report on more than one occasion (the letter refers to other communications that I have not seen) on missionary activity in a place as remote as the Hawaiian Islands gives an idea of how seriously the Ottomans took this threat. The document also suggests that the official in question had been briefed by his superiors to keep tabs on missionary activity in the United States.

LETTER FROM THE OTTOMAN CONSULATE IN NEW YORK TO THE
SUBLIME PORTE DATED 21 AUGUST 1897⁴

"The islands generally referred to by the name of the Hawaiian Isles are eight in number and are situated in the Pacific Ocean.⁵ Until about 60 years ago their people lived a happy life according to their tribal customs, not having any religion or any modern law. Then an extreme misfortune befell them and they somehow became the headquarters of the American Protestant missionaries. As is well known, these missionaries are an infamous band who use religion to achieve political power and advance their material interest. When they first arrived on these isles, whose mild climate is very suitable for the growth of rare and beautiful plants, and whose people are of a soft and accommodating disposition, it was as if they had fallen upon a free banquet the likes of which they had never seen before. As is their wont, they set about using religion as a front for their vicious aggression and soon they had converted the Hawaiians to the Lutheran faith. By sinking their talons right into the very conscience of the people, they made their rulers bow down before the cross and forced them to accept all manner of humiliation in its name. Even though the local custom forbade the acquisition of property by foreigners, they convinced the rulers that they had to have a base for their religious work and thus tricked them into granting them this privilege.

"Now they were ready to reveal their true intentions and secret

plans. They returned briefly to the United States and began to hold meetings in churches and meeting halls. In these meetings they announced that they had discovered the Hawaiian people, who had been heathen before their arrival and were now Protestant; these same had been savages but had now achieved moral fortitude. They recounted all this with such conviction and sincerity of purpose that they soon were able to collect great sums of money from the Americans, who, like people everywhere, have a great weakness for religion. All this money was collected in the name of religious fervor in circumstances that are worth describing in detail. When the men and women at these meetings hear about the victories of Christianity they are overcome with joy. In a state of mind that approaches a trance, they strip off their rings, necklaces, gold watches and chains and throw them into the collection box. Some hand over all the money in their pockets or sign checks worth several thousand dollars. Others immediately make out deeds of gift for valuable property, or even donate their own dwellings. None of this is exaggerated; in order to ascertain its truth please refer to my previous communication dated 13 August 1897 in which I enclosed a clipping from the New York Herald.

"In short, all these millions of dollars thus collected were gathered in the name of civilizing the Hawaiians and bringing them religious faith. However, the missionaries completely misappropriated these funds and used them to buy property for themselves. Because land [in Hawai'i] was very cheap in those days, these millions were able to buy up a large proportion of the islands. The missionaries now combined preaching with planting and acquired large estates, which they gave over to sugar cane cultivation, using the local population as agricultural labor. These poor people thus became servants where they had once been masters, and what was more, were not even aware of this fact. Because their eyes were blinded by ignorance and the veil of lies pulled over them by the missionaries, they believed their privations to be a sign of divine providence and godly favor. Yet, before long they became aware of the deception.

"Even though the missionaries controlled the land, they knew that as long as the population remained Hawaiian, they would one day throw off the fetters of slavery and force the priests to

leave the islands. Again, religion and civilization were called to the rescue as the priests convinced the local rulers to throw open the islands to immigration, thus allowing them to bring in new settlers from America, Japan, and other places. This solved the immediate problem [of having to rely on a Hawaiian labor force], yet it was not enough for these people whose nature does not allow them to rest until they have committed the most vile of misdeeds. Thus in order to break up the native population they put about the story that the Hawaiian climate was beneficial for those suffering from contagious diseases. There then flooded in immigrants with syphilis, mange, and all manner of like diseases. These people had soon infected the local population with incurable ailments. Although the afflicted natives now realized what had been done to them, alas, what can one who is about to surrender his soul to death do to wrest his rights from his undoer? What was even more bizarre was the fact that the priests, not fearing the judgment of history, nor having any conscience, now put about the tale that the queen was responsible for the misfortunes that had befallen the islands as she had allowed in the immigrants. Thus they provoked the local population both against their legitimate ruler and against the foreigners. This string of deceptions and intrigues led to widespread turmoil; much blood was spilled and many hearths extinguished. In the end, those afflicted with contagion were shipped off to a remote island, the queen was dethroned and sent to Washington, where she became the laughingstock of polite society, and the islands were turned into a republic. A certain Mr. Dole, a descendant of the missionaries, was appointed head of state.⁶ Thus the aggressors managed to do away with all the dangers along their path and achieve political control as well as economic power. From missionaries they became millionaires, and from subjects they were transformed into rulers.

"Yet, an event was to occur at this point which seriously affected the political fate of the islands. As is known to your Excellency, the defeat of the Democratic Party in the American elections and its replacement in the government by the Republicans led to the application of the protective tariff. As the United States does not grow enough sugar cane to satisfy its needs, it has always

imported cane from Cuba, the Philippines, and Hawai'i. The political turmoil in the first two has meant that the Americans have had to rely on Hawaiian sugar. Therefore just as the missionaries were about to profit greatly from this opportunity, they have had to abide by the tariff because of their status as a foreign country. They therefore started to campaign for the annexation of Hawai'i to the United States. Yet, at first glance, the famous law that decrees that the United States may not annex any land that does not adjoin its present territory appeared a serious handicap. But it is quite clear that for these men who had managed to swindle a people out of their country, it was but a small matter to invent a suitable ruse to convince their own people to add a new land to their previous holdings. In effect they have in the past several months been reverting to the old methods that destroyed the Hawaiians; now the churches and meeting houses again resound to their fine rhetoric. They are now arguing that when the Hawaiian people are left to their own devices they have a natural inclination to revert to their old licentious ways which have ended up spreading disease among them. The only way this can be prevented [they argue] is for them to be taken in hand by a strong and determined government; therefore it is a Christian duty to prevail upon the government of the United States to annex the islands. In America the masses of the population are quite simple-minded and are easily influenced by a good speech. They have no powers of judgment and comparison. Thus they are unable to see the contradictions between what the missionaries were saying before and what they say now. The lofty ideals evoked in the name of religion once again provoke the American people to fervor, and, as before, they are taken in by the lies of the missionaries. This fervor has yielded the results desired by the disciples of Satan posing as the envoys of Jesus; the United States has recently announced the annexation of the islands.

"Although the Japanese government, which has some 15,000 nationals living on the islands, has protested this development, the press and informed circles here are saying that the fait accompli thus established will soon be recognized by the Japanese as well.

"I have taken the liberty of giving your Excellency such a

detailed review of the history of the Hawaiian islands for the following three reasons. First, I wanted to stress that the law which stipulates that the United States may not annex territory that does not adjoin its already existing holdings is not inviolable. Second, I wanted to illustrate that the influence of the missionaries on public opinion is such that they may even force the government to disregard one of its own laws. Third, as these missionaries are also active in our August Master's well-protected domains, and their malicious works are observable daily, I judged it advisable to give an example of what manner of evil they are capable of.

"I remain your obedient servant etc."

Although some of the views expressed in the document are extremely naive and display all the bias one might expect from the representative of a power that felt itself to be under mortal threat, others are closer to the mark. Particularly the observations on the fund-raising "mania" as described by the consul bring to mind the similar manufactured frenzy of the television evangelists. The other point worthy of note is the fact that the Ottoman diplomat mentioned the bypassing of the law on territorial contiguity as the most important element in his report. Obviously, given the presence of American missionaries on Ottoman soil, the official was careful to stress that the Hawaiian example could now be a modular example which could be transported overseas, and the United States could join the other great powers as a major headache for Turkish policymakers. The fact that an Ottoman official should have followed the developments in Hawai'i so closely points in the direction of a world that was becoming smaller.

NOTES

- ¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987) 76.
- ² On American missionary activity in Turkey, see Frank Andrews Stone, *Academies for Anatolia* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).
- ³ Jeremy Salt, "A Precarious Symbiosis: Ottoman Christians and Foreign Missionaries in the Nineteenth Century," *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 3 (1985-86): 53-67.

- ⁴ Basbakanlik Arsivi, Yildiz Arsivi Hususi Maruzat 376/68; Letter from Ottoman Consul in New York to Ottoman Foreign Ministry, 21 Aug. 1897.
- ⁵ It might prove interesting to compare the rendition of events given by the Ottoman consul with an authoritative work on Hawaiian history such as Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).
- ⁶ Here the consul's information seems accurate enough. See Gavan Daws, *Holy Man, Father Damien of Molokai* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 232: "The chief executive of the Hawaiian government after monarchy fell was Sanford Ballard Dole, son of a Protestant missionary, one of the best of the 'mission boys.' "

